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## Epikoinos: The Ball Game Episkuros and Iliad 12.421–23

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*(Article begins on next page)*

*Epikoinos*: The Ball Game *Episkuros* and *Iliad* 12.421-3

Thanks largely to the testimony of Pollux, our knowledge of the ball game *episkuros*, though fragmentary, is still relatively full by comparison with what we know of other ancient team sports.<sup>1</sup> Also known as *epikoinos*, *ephêbikê*, or *sphairomakhia*, the game was played on a field divided into two halves by a central line marked out by stones or stone chippings—the word for which was *skuros*—and delimited at either end by secondary lines.<sup>2</sup> Two teams of unknown (and perhaps variable) size assembled on either side of the *skuros*, on which the ball was placed at the start of play. We have no certain indication of how possession of the ball was first acquired. Nigel Crowther thinks it likely that the first possession was determined by lot, but I prefer to see in Pollux's οἱ προανελόμενοι 'those who have snatched [the ball] up first' a reference to some kind of struggle or contest for the first possession: perhaps the teams or designated players raced from the base lines to the *skuros*, the ball belonging to whoever first seized it.<sup>3</sup> In any case, the team which acquired possession threw the ball toward their opponents' half of the field, while the opposing team had the task of retrieving the ball 'while still in motion' (φερομένης)<sup>4</sup> and of casting it back, in turn, toward the opposite side. The object of the game was to force one's opponents across the base line, thus claiming possession of the entire field. As far as we can tell, the game ended when the field was gained, that is, this was not a goal-scoring game *à la* American football. "Presumably the team that had the strongest arms won," writes John McClelland,<sup>5</sup> but we cannot be certain that an important role was not played by blocks, tackles, or various other techniques aimed at

disrupting an opponent's ability to retrieve the ball, techniques that might justify the alternative name *sphairomakhia*.

This is virtually all we can say with confidence about *episkuros*. Although the sources are late, the game appears to have solidly classical, if not older, roots. A late-sixth century statue base from Athens depicts what has often been identified as *episkuros*; if it is not, it is certainly a game very much like it.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars have identified *episkuros* with the game played by the Spartan *sphaireis*, but there is not enough evidence either to confirm or refute this hypothesis.<sup>7</sup>

The object of my interest, however, is not the nature of *episkuros*—as important as this is to my argument—but rather one of the alternative names supplied by Pollux and other ancient commentators: *epikoinos*. The name is taken universally by ancient and modern writers as a reference to the fact that the game was played in teams: *episkuros* involves *to koinon*, what is 'common,' to the extent that it is a competition for groups rather than individuals.<sup>8</sup> But *episkuros* was not the only ancient game (ball or otherwise) played in teams or groups, so that, on this view, the name would not refer to a particularly distinctive feature. This should be a first reason to suspect that the explanation is not correct: other games might equally lay claim to the designation *epikoinos* if all that is meant is that groups are involved. (Admittedly, the same objection could be made for another of Pollux's alternative names, *ephêbikê*.)

I would like to advance the argument that, in accordance with a pattern we observe in the case of other games, the term *epikoinos* should be understood as a reference to the game's most distinctive feature, namely, the spatial configuration of the playing field. We can compare the ball game *trigôn*, so called because the three players

stood in a triangular arrangement.<sup>9</sup> As in this case (and like the term *episkuros* itself, which refers to the distinctive center line) *epikoinos* refers not to the players but the playing field, which, we recall, is the sole means by which victory is defined in this “territorial game.”<sup>10</sup> The field is *epikoinos* to the extent that it belongs alternately (following the back-and-forth movement of play) to each of two different groups, until it is appropriated entirely by one of the groups, and thus ceases to be *epikoinos*. The game is a dramatization of the negotiation of competing territorial claims.

In support of this understanding of *epikoinos* as a meaningful spatial designation, I cite a passage from the end of *Iliad* Book 12, which compares the Trojans’ struggle to drive the Achaeans back from the wall encircling their camp to a conflict between two farmers who are arguing over boundaries in a ‘common field’ (417-24):

οὔτε γὰρ ἴφθιμοι Λύκιοι Δαναῶν ἐδύναντο  
τεῖχος ῥηξάμενοι θέσθαι παρὰ νηυσὶ κέλευθον,  
οὔτε ποτ’ αἰχμηταὶ Δαναοὶ Λυκίους ἐδύναντο  
τείχεος ἄλψ ὥσασθαι, ἐπεὶ τὰ πρῶτα πέλασθεν.  
ἀλλ’ ὥς τ’ ἄμφ’ οὔροισι δὺ’ ἀνέρε δηριάσθον  
μέτρ’ ἐν χερσὶν ἔχοντες, ἐπιζύνω ἐν ἀρούρη,  
ὥ τ’ ὀλίγῳ ἐνὶ χώρῳ ἐρίζητον περὶ ἴσης,  
ὥς ἄρα τοὺς διέεργον ἐπάλξιες·

For neither were the steadfast Lycians able, by breaching  
the wall of the Danaans, to force a way to the ships,

nor were the Danaan spearmen at all able to drive  
the Lycians back from the wall, once they had drawn near.  
But just as two men contend over boundary-stones  
in a common field, holding measuring-rods in their hands,  
two men who fight for an equal share in a small space of land,  
just so did the battlements keep them apart.

The scholia gloss ἐπιζύων as κοινὸς ὅρους ἐχούσῃ ‘having common boundaries’ (bT scholion ad 12.422), but this seems to do violence to the natural meaning of *epixunos* (the epic equivalent of *epikoinos*); perhaps we should think rather of the delimitation of boundaries on common land allotted for private use.<sup>11</sup> It is essential, however, to consider the function of this metaphor in context, and to take account of the reciprocal relationship between tenor and vehicle (to use I. A. Richards’ terms for the two elements of a metaphor or simile, the underlying referent and the figurative expression respectively<sup>12</sup>): in order to understand the force of *epixunos* in the simile, we must understand the situation it is meant to describe. As in the case of *episkuros*, we are dealing here with a territorial conflict in which one side seeks to dispossess the other of the area it occupies. In the Trojan conflict, the dispossession will be, ultimately, total. For the farmers, presumably, the entire field is not at stake, but the tenor (the Trojan plain) allows the poet to speak of it (the vehicle) as though it were. The farmers’ land, the plain of Troy, the playing field: all three are *epikoinos* insofar as they are the objects of the competing territorial claims of opposed parties.

A dispute between neighboring farmers is an apt image for the conflict between Trojans and Achaeans to the extent that the latter is, ultimately, a territorial dispute. The setting of boundaries is also, I submit, a possible, if not likely, referent for the spatial symbolism of *episkuros*. We can take McClelland's interpretation of *pome*, a team game of late medieval or early Renaissance Italy, as an example of how one might associate the semiotics of games with real-world referents:

“Pome” seems inescapably connected to the playing surface and its most likely derivation is from *pomerium* / *pomerio*, terms that in Latin and Italian denoted the open space within the city walls that was kept free of buildings, and that symbolized the city's beginnings. *Pome* is a highly ritualistic game whose referent is the beginnings of civic society. Players appear without any identifying accoutrements and ask to share equitably a defined space. The request is denied, a competition ensues, but a resolution is achieved.<sup>13</sup>

In our case, *episkuros* can be understood as a stylization of a similarly fundamental process—the distribution or appropriation of land rights—that we know to have figured prominently in the early history of the *polis*, notably at Athens.<sup>14</sup> I am thinking not merely of the territorial nature of the game, but of its concrete manifestation. The center line, if it did in fact consist of stone chips, would be an effective representation of a boundary line or fence. Even the game's action, the throwing of the ball, is conceivably connected to the actual practice of setting boundaries. As comparandum, I cite a custom

once practiced among Geg Albanians for settling boundary disputes between neighboring communities, namely, the ‘thrown rock’ (*gurapesh*): “When the two tribes had quarrelled over a boundary each selected a champion athlete to throw the weight. Whichever threw it farthest won the land in dispute for the tribe.”<sup>15</sup> *Gurapesh* survives among the Albanians as a “folk contest to see who can throw a heavy stone the furthest.”<sup>16</sup>

The alternative name *ephēbikē* allows some further reflection on the relation between the game and the archetypal situation of a boundary dispute. From the ephebic oaths of Athens and Dreros, we can see that in the fourth century the integration of the ephebes into civic society was closely tied to the definition of the territorial integrity of the *polis*.<sup>17</sup> This connection is expressed not only discursively in the oath but also institutionally, in the practice of sending ephebes to frontier zones in order to garrison the boundary forts.<sup>18</sup> At Athens, the aition for the Apaturia, the festival at which ephebes were reintegrated into their phratries, involved a border dispute between Athens and Boeotia.<sup>19</sup> In general, then, the archaic traditions later institutionalized in the *ephēbeia* are closely tied to the transgression and definition of boundaries, which might be represented mythically in terms of a border dispute.

The *skuros*—the white limestone gravel that marks out the initial boundary between the opposing teams—takes on additional significance in this regard. It is first of all necessary to point out that, in examining the internal evidence of Greek, we cannot make a sharp distinction between the roots σκυρ- and σκιρ-, which are written interchangeably and with variable patterns of accentuation<sup>20</sup>; beside Pollux’s λατύπη . . . ἦν σκυρὸν καλοῦσιν, we have as well Hesychius’s σκιρός ἐστὶν ἡ λατύπη.<sup>21</sup> Building on the linguistic arguments of Jacoby, who was himself establishing “even more soundly”

the views of Robert, Pierre Vidal-Naquet understands this *skiros* as the root of several significant names of Athenian cult and topography (the cult name of Athena Σκιράς; the Σκῆρον, a district between Athens and Eleusis, also the site of a temple to Athena Skiras; and Σκῆρος, a cult figure honored in conjunction with this Athena): “the word *skiron* means ‘lime’ and so ‘badlands’; and Felix Jacoby has shown that the names *Skiras*, *Skiros*, and *Skiron* were generally given to outlying districts that either were or had been at some time in the past frontier areas.”<sup>22</sup> As boundary areas, these places are precisely those involved in ephebic rites of passage. The Athenian legend of Theseus, “that ephebe of ephebes,” has the hero vanquish Skirôn, an outlaw notoriously hostile to *xenoi*, at the *Skeirônides petrai*, the “Skirônian rocks,” west of Megara<sup>23</sup>; the location is significant, since the same legend speaks of Theseus’s annexation of Megarian territory and the consequent fixing of the boundary between the Peloponnesus and ‘Ionia’ at the Isthmus.<sup>24</sup> The district of Skiron was situated at the ancient boundary between Athens and Eleusis, and was home to a sanctuary of Athena Skiras (in fact, the aition for the sanctuary involved a conflict, possibly over boundaries, between Athens and Eleusis).<sup>25</sup> In Jacoby’s view, this sanctuary was the end-point for an ephebic footrace that took place during the festival of the Skira.<sup>26</sup> Even if, as is perhaps more likely,<sup>27</sup> the footrace actually belonged to the Oschophoria, and so ended at the temple of Athena Skiras in Phaleron rather than Skiron, we nevertheless have a significant correlation of the root *skir-* with the goal of an ephebic contest.<sup>28</sup>

We can supplement these Attic data with evidence from other regions. The Σκιριτίς was a border area between Laconia and Arcadia; to judge from Xenophon, this was a contested region, subject to frequent incursions from both sides (*Hell.* 6.5.24-25,



7.4.21). More importantly, however, this region gave its name to a special unit within the Spartan army, customarily stationed outside the encampment and charged with patrolling its limits by night<sup>29</sup>: this Σκιρίτης λόχος (cf. Diod. Sic. 15.32.1) thus matches remarkably well the ephebic paradigm sketched by Vidal-Naquet. The most well-known ‘ephebic’ toponym is, of course, Σκῶρος, the marginal island where Achilles spent a period of isolation and transvestism (this in itself is a mark of his ephebic status during this episode) before being integrated into the Achaean host.<sup>30</sup>

It is worth stressing that there is more than just a lexical link between these traditions relating to ephebic ritual and the *skuros* that marked out the central boundary in *ephēbikê*. The material itself—white, friable limestone or gypsum<sup>31</sup>—had, in the Athenian context at least, a cultic function. The cult image of Athena Skiras was made from or covered with white *skiros*, and Jacoby suggests that the two νεανίσκοι θηλυφανεῖς who led the procession at the Oschophoria (also part of the worship of Athena Skiras) may have “achieved their feminine aspect by painting their faces with the same γῆ λευκή which was carried in the procession.”<sup>32</sup> Vidal-Naquet has established the ephebic significance both of this transvestism and of the contrast between white and black.<sup>33</sup> More recently, in the context of his research on the mythical paradigm of the ‘war of total annihilation,’ Pierre Ellinger has sketched a network of associations that bind *skiros* in particular and ‘gypsum’ more generally to legendary narratives involving the kind of anti-hoplite tactics that belong to the world of the ephebe.<sup>34</sup> Thus we have a collection of data suggesting an association between the white limestone signified by *skir-* / *skur-* and the symbolic boundary that occupies such an important position in ephebic ritual.<sup>35</sup>

If *episkuros* can be understood as a symbolization of a boundary dispute, then the relation between game and referent is approximately the same as the relation between the simile and the narrative in the *Iliad*: one is a representation or stylization of the other. In the case of the *Iliad*, it is likewise possible to reverse the relation between simile and narrative and say that, from the point of view of the audience, the heroic world of the poem is a stylization of the ‘real life’ situation of boundary disputes. That is, epic narrative and game occupy analogous positions as images of an archetypal conflict over boundaries. The question is, are these stylizations aware of each other? More narrowly, and perhaps more importantly, is the *Iliad* aware of *episkuros*?<sup>36</sup>

The situations, of course, are roughly the same in the Iliadic narrative and the game. Both feature territorial battles (the military overtones of *episkuros* can be inferred from the alternative names *sphairomakhia* and, probably, *ephēbikē*) in which one side seeks to ‘drive back’ the other (Pollux’s ἀπώσονται; cf. *Il.* 12.420 ἄψ ὥσασθαι). The most important consideration, however, is that understanding *episkuros* as, so to speak, a hidden point of comparison, concealed behind a simile naming the game’s referent, resolves certain problems presented by the simile. The first of these is what appears at first to be the “unusually recondite” point of comparison (in the words of Hainsworth 1993, ad loc.). It is not, after all, immediately obvious exactly what similarity we are meant to find between the situation of the farmers and that of the armies; Hainsworth feels that what is at issue is the narrow space dividing the soldiers.<sup>37</sup> If, however, we understand *episkuros* as a concealed point of reference, then the comparison becomes at once much more immediate and much more concrete: the poet is conjuring a mental image for a territorial battle that is spatially defined by the central axis of a wall.

A second superficial problem with the simile of the boundary dispute concerns the numerical disjunction between the simile (which describes two individual farmers) and its narrative referent (which involves the armies as wholes, that is, pluralities). Leonard Muellner has noted a general rule governing the construction of bird similes in Homer, namely, that such similes are “consistently precise” in their correspondence to the number of actors in the tenor (the narrative referent): “When tenor changes, vehicle’s predators and victims change accordingly. For instance, two isolated heroes fighting each other resemble two vultures fighting one another . . . Several individualized heroes fighting against a massed army are like vultures . . . swooping down on the massed birds of the plain,” and so on.<sup>38</sup> Muellner limits his examples to bird similes, but in fact his observations are generalizable. Thus, to take an example from the same agricultural sphere as our simile, an earlier battle between massed Achaeans and Trojans is compared to the approach of opposing ranks of (plural) reapers (11.67-71). In Book 12 we find an asymmetry between pluralized tenor (Λύκιοι and Δαναοί) and individualized vehicle (the two farmers), but this asymmetry disappears if we understand the simile as an evocation of the team sport *episkuros*. It is interesting to note that the scene that motivates the comparison is introduced by Sarpedon’s words of encouragement to the Lycians, in which he renounces the individual heroism that dominates in the *Iliad* and advocates instead concerted action (*Il.* 12.409-12):

ὦ Λύκιοι, τί τ’ ἄρ’ ὧδε μεθίετε θούριδος ἀλκῆς;  
ἀργαλέον δέ μοί ἐστι καὶ ἰφθίμῳ περ ἐόντι  
μούνῳ ῥηξαμένῳ θέσθαι παρὰ νηυσὶ κέλευθον·

ἀλλ' ἐφομαρτεῖτε· πλεόνων δέ τε ἔργον ἄμεινον.

Lycians, why do you slacken thus your impetuous valor?

Steadfast as I am, it is difficult for me alone

to breach the wall and make a way to the ships.

Follow closely: more hands make the task easier.

This notable expression of team spirit ('there's no *I* in *team*') is not without parallel (cf. 20.354-57), but it certainly stands out. The immediate context of the simile involves a marked shift from isolated heroics to group effort: the sudden switch *back* to individualized actors in the simile is thus all the more striking and in need of explanation.

This alternation between singular and plural is in a sense the key to understanding the relation I am positing between the game *episkuros* and *Iliad* 12. On the one hand, introducing the game into the referential system of the Homeric text allows us to alleviate the dissonance arising from an apparent violation of the rules of Homeric poetics. On the other, this dissonance itself—the tension between singular and plural—provides a reason for the incorporation of ephebic ritual into the referential system. As Vidal-Naquet has stressed, one of the fundamental oppositions underlying the complex of ephebic myths and rituals was the contrast between individual and collective action.<sup>39</sup> As rites of passage, the Athenian *ephêbeia* and the cognate institutions of other states sought to incorporate young men into the ranks of the hoplite army by the “law of symmetrical inversion,”<sup>40</sup> that is, by making of them anti-hoplites during adolescence. The premier example of this pattern is the Spartan *krupeteia*, which made the pre-hoplite a lone,

nocturnal hunter. What we witness in *Iliad* 12 is precisely a transition from the anti-hoplite paradigm of individual action to a strong statement of the hoplite ethos.<sup>41</sup> This transition is repeated and amplified by the shift from the singular antagonists of the simile to the collective antagonists of the game that I propose underlies the simile. Not by coincidence, the concrete link between these multiple (explicit and implicit) levels of discourse is the presence of a literal or figural wall. Ellinger has demonstrated—partly with reference to the Achaean fortifications imperiled in *Iliad* 12—the extent to which the figure of the defensive wall stands in opposition to the hoplite battle-line: it is a contrivance, a *mêkhanê*, that substitutes for the ideal self-sufficiency of the line of citizen-soldiers.<sup>42</sup>

What would an ancient audience gain by understanding *episkuros* as a point of reference in this passage? How is our reading of it enriched if we do the same? First, consider the position of the passage: at the end of Book 12, the simile stands exactly at the midpoint of the poem. Certainly part of the poetic function of this comparison—as of the simile that follows, comparing the balanced situation of the battle to the equal portions of wool weighed out by a weaver (12.433-6)—is to emphasize that at this moment, both in terms of the state of the battle and of the architecture of the poem, matters stand, as it were, on the point of the balance-beam. *Episkuros*, with its equally divided playing field, provides a powerful visual, spatial image for this moment of tense equilibrium.

Second, the evocation of *episkuros* heightens our sense of the peril that hangs over the combatants, to a far greater degree than the simple image of two quarreling farmers. By itself, the image of the farmers has the potential to downplay the seriousness

of the situation: after all, for the farmers, only a small bit of land is at stake. But if we are able to associate *episkuros* with this image, then the gravity of the situation becomes manifest: we understand that this is an all-or-nothing conflict, that either the Achaeans or the Trojans will be expelled entirely from the territory—will be, in a word, exterminated.<sup>43</sup> And we understand that the game only ends when one or the other side perishes.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Poll. 9.103-7. For the text, in collation with all other extant testimonia, as well as a detailed analysis of the evidence, see Crowther 1997 (reprinted as chapter 10.2 in Crowther 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. McClelland 2002, 6: “the stones—a durable material—confer greater importance on the mid-field line than on the goal lines, which are merely scratched on the ground.” I am grateful to Prof. McClelland for making available to me a copy of his paper, which was distributed to participants in the 5<sup>th</sup> Congreso de Historia del Deporte en Europa in a book containing the conference proceedings, but not formally published. Like McClelland (cf. also, e.g., Barber 1959, 101), I understand Pollux to mean that the central line was made of stones or gravel, rather than being merely traced on the ground with a piece of chalk or lime.

<sup>3</sup> Thus Mau 1905, col. 200: “Der Ball wird zu Beginn des Spiels auf die mittlere Linie gelegt, die beiden Parteien laufen auf ihn zu und die ihn ergreift, hat den ersten Wurf.” But cf. Crowther 1997, p. 3, n. 11.

<sup>4</sup> It is unclear whether the expression means ‘on the fly,’ or whether ‘ground balls’ were permitted.

<sup>5</sup> McClelland 2002, 3.

<sup>6</sup> For bibliography on the question, see Crowther 1997, 5; cf. Barber 1959, 101 (“almost certainly ὁ ἐπίσκυρος”). For a detailed treatment of the base from archeological and art historical points of view, see Casson 1925, who likewise identifies the game as *episkuros* and offers as well many interesting ideas about how the game was played (168-9). The base was likely part of the Themistoclean wall, but the construction in which it was

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discovered appears to be part of later fortifications (ibid. 165-6). For a reproduction of the relief, see Miller 2004a, 173. The base has three sculpted sides, all of which appear to pertain to the athletic and recreational life of ephebes. (For a reproduction of another of the three sides, showing a wrestling match, see Miller 2004a, 74.)

<sup>7</sup> Gardiner 1930, 60-1; but cf. the more skeptical account of Crowther 1997, 367-9.

<sup>8</sup> Suet. *Peri paidiôn* 2 (cf. Eust. 1601.30-40): ἐπίσκυρος δέ, ἣ ἐχρῶντο οἱ παίζοντες κατὰ πλῆθη, καλουμένη διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἐπίκοινος; Barber 1959, 101: “the team game (ἡ ἐπίκοινος παιδιά)”; Crowther 1997, 363: “*episkyros* was a game for teams, as is obvious from the expressions ἐπίκοινος and κατὰ πλῆθος”; Casson 1925, 169: the term implies “that it was a team game”; Miller 2004b, 124, who translates *epikoinos* as “commonball”; Kennel 1995, 61, who translates “all-in game.”

<sup>9</sup> For *trigôn*, see Crowther 2004, 355, with references.

<sup>10</sup> I take the description of *episkuros* as a “territorial game” from McClelland 2002, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Hainsworth 1993, ad loc.: “a common field, distinct from the τεμένη of the aristocracy, cf. the *ki-ti-me-na* and *ke-ke-me-na ko-to-na* of the Pylos Tablets.”

<sup>12</sup> Richards 1936, 96-103; see p. 121 for the cross-influence of tenor and vehicle.

<sup>13</sup> McClelland 2002, 6-7. See now McClelland 2007, 126-7.

<sup>14</sup> The trimeters of Solon, in describing the party strife that involved precisely the redefinition of boundaries (fr. 36.5-7 West = Arist. [*Ath. Pol.*] 12.4), make remarkable use of boundary imagery by comparing the lawgiver to a *horos* on the frontier between two hostile groups: ἐγὼ . . . ὥσπερ ἐν μεταίχμιῳ / ὅρος κατέστην (fr. 37.9-10 W = Arist. [*Ath. Pol.*] 12.5).

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<sup>15</sup> Hasluck 1954, 103. The relevant articles in Gjeçov's compilation of the law code of 'Lekë Dukagjini' (§§262-3) make it clear that this is not a matter of acquiring unclaimed land, but of distributing land which is in some sense 'common': "The one who throws the rock furthest wins that territory for his Banner. More precisely: If I throw the rock further, I take the territory from you; if you throw it further, you take it from me" (Fox 1989, 78).

<sup>16</sup> *Oxford Albanian-English Dictionary*, s.v.

<sup>17</sup> Ephebic oath at Athens: Rhodes and Osborne 2003, 88.19-20 (ὅροι τῆς πατρίδος, πυροί, κριθαί, ἄμπελοι, ἐλᾶαι, συκαῖ), with the comment of Vidal-Naquet 1986, 108; at Dreros: *SIG* 527.50-55 (μήτε τὰμ πόλιν προδοσεῖν τὰν τῶν Δρηρίων μήτε οὔρεια τὰ τῶν Δρηρίων).

<sup>18</sup> Merkelbach 1973, 58; for boundary forts on Crete (specifically in the territory of Olonte), see Effenterre 1949.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, this dispute is resolved through a *monomakhia*: the tension between community and individual will reappear toward the end of my discussion.

<sup>20</sup> Ellinger 1993, p. 76, n. 181, Jeanmaire 1939, 325; cf. Burkert 1983, p. 146, n. 44. Jacoby 1954, 2:201 actually reads ἡ ἐπίσκορος in Poll.

<sup>21</sup> S.v. *skireitai*.

<sup>22</sup> Vidal-Naquet 1986, 115; see also Ellinger 1993, 80 for σκιρ- as a designation of the *eskhatiai* of city-states. In this context we should note as well Ar. *Vesp.* 924-5 ὅστις περιπλεύσας τὴν θυνείαν ἐν κύκλῳ / ἐκ τῶν πόλεων τὸ σκῖρον ἐξεδήδοκεν, on which Jacoby 1954, 2.201 comments, "Aristophanes seems to pun with the two meanings, 'rind

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of cheese' and 'lime'"; the connection between calcareous soil and frontier regions is here strikingly relevant.

<sup>23</sup> "That ephebe of ephebes": Vidal-Naquet 1986, 112. For the contest between Theseus and Skirôn, see Plut. *Thes.* 10.1-4 (note also 6.2, ἐπεὶ δὲ μειράκιον ὦν ἅμα τῇ τοῦ σώματος ῥώμῃ διέφαινεν ἀλκὴν καὶ φρόνημα) and Bacchyl. *Dith.* 4.25. Bacchylides's song presents Theseus as the model ephebe (note esp. 56-7, παῖδα δ' ἔμμεν πρόθηβον): see Merkelbach 1973, who argues that the song was composed for an ephebic festival. In his analysis of Theseus as an archetypal initiatory figure, Jeanmaire 1939, 325 draws attention to "la fréquence dans le complexe mythique dont Thésée est le centre des épisodes rattachés à des noms propres dans lesquels se retrouve la racine *skiros*."

<sup>24</sup> Plut. *Thes.* 25.4-7, where we also read an alternative account of the founding of the Isthmian Games, according to which Theseus instituted them in honor of Skirôn. See also Merkelbach 1973, 59-60.

<sup>25</sup> Deubner 1932, 48; for the conflict between Athens and Eleusis, see Paus. 1.36.4 and Jacoby 1954, 1.290.

<sup>26</sup> Jacoby 1954, 1.300 ff.

<sup>27</sup> See Kadletz 1980, 370 and Irvine and Rutherford 1988. I am grateful to Douglas Frame for pointing out to me the objections to Jacoby's argument.

<sup>28</sup> The crucial piece of evidence cited by Kadletz 1980 against Jacoby suggests a further possible link between the semantics of *skir-* and the footrace. The calendar relief from the church of Hagios Eleutherios in Athens appears to place the footrace in question in the month of Pyanepsion, and thus in the context of the Oschophoria, not the Skira. The relief shows a naked youth bearing the *ôskhos* and standing in what is likely a posture of

victory, with one foot placed on a large mound of round objects (see Deubner 1932, plate 35, for a detailed reproduction of the relief). Some have identified this mound as a pile of grapes, which the youth is in the act of pressing; Kadletz, however, argues that this interpretation is impossible, and speculates that the mound represents the goal of the race (368). Indeed, the objects of which the mound is composed appear to be slightly larger than the grapes of the *ôskhos*, while its shape and dimensions suggest a pile of stones rather than of grapes. I suggest that the *mot juste* for such a mound of stones would be *skiros* / *skuros*. In support of this claim I cite not only the *skuros* of *episkuros*, but also the variant reading for *Il.* 23.332-3 (ἦ τό γε νύσσα τέτυκτο ἐπὶ προτέρων ἀνθρώπων, / καὶ νῦν τέρματ' ἔθηκε ποδάρκης δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς, with reference to the turning-post in the chariot race, which is the stump of an ancient tree flanked by *two white stones*) attested by Aristarchus: ἦ τευ σῆμα βροτοῖο πάλαι κατατεθνηῶτος, / ἡὲ σκῖρος ἔην· νῦν αὖ θέτο τέρματ' Ἀχιλλεύς (I have underlined Aristarchus's *varia lectio*). Contrary to Robert 1885, 350-1, whose interpretation does not produce adequate sense for this variant, I suggest that the meaning of *skiros* in this context should be sought in the domain of boundaries: we can understand *skiros* here either as 'goal-marker' (thus equivalent to *nussa* in l. 332 of our text) or as 'territorial boundary.' Homeric geography elsewhere attests the paradigm of white earth as boundary: at *Od.* 24.11 the *Leukas petrê* (Jeanmaire 1939, 325-28 discusses such mythical 'white rocks' in connection with the term *skiros*) marks the boundary between the worlds of living and dead.

<sup>29</sup> Xen. *Lac.* 12.3. While other sources speak of this unit as composed of troops actually levied from the *Skiritis*, Xenophon's text (which has unfortunately suffered some

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corruption at this point) seems to suggest the membership of other non-Spartan soldiers in the corps.

<sup>30</sup> According to Strabo 9.1.9, Σκιράς was an ancient name for Salamis. This detail is tied to—but not explained by—the (Salaminian) cult of Athena Skiras at Phaleron. Similarly to Achilles' island refuge, the name perhaps suggests the marginality of Salamis from the Athenian point of view. The same marginality is perhaps suggested by Artemidorus's account of the death of Theseus, transmitted by Hesychius s.v. Σκυρία δίκη:

Ἀρτεμίδωρος ιδίως φησὶ ἢ Θήσεως καλεῖται τελευτή. φυγόντα γὰρ αὐτὸν εἰς Σκῦρον ἐκεῖ κατακρημνισθῆναί φασιν (Poll. 8.81 gives a different explanation for the phrase).

<sup>31</sup> For the range of materials covered by the Greek word *gupsos*, which is often used to gloss *skiros/skuros*, see Ellinger 1993, 63, Caley and Richards 1956, 210.

<sup>32</sup> Jacoby 1954, 2.202; cf. Jeanmaire 1939, 356-7. This interesting suggestion calls to mind the fact that Achilles' transvestism takes place on an island whose name was said to derive from its chalky, white soil (*Etym. Magn.* 720.24-27).

<sup>33</sup> Vidal-Naquet 1986, 115-7.

<sup>34</sup> Ellinger 1993 (for *skiros* in particular, see pp. 76-88), which provides the explication of the mythical value of 'gypsum' promised by Ellinger 1978. Ephebic elements are for the most part implicit in Ellinger's account, but cf. p. 58, where he mentions "le symbolisme éphébique" underlying one of his examples. When we return below to *Iliad* 12, the reader should bear in mind the connection Ellinger makes between *gupsos* / *skiros* and the 'war of annihilation,' the premier example being the stratagem employed by the Phokians against the Thessalians (Hdt. 8.27).

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<sup>35</sup> To round out this discussion of possible ephebic associations of *skir-/skur-*, I note Hesychius's entries on σκυρθαλιάς (Θεόφραστος τοῦς ἐφήβους οὕτω φησὶ καλεῖσθαι, Διονύσιος δὲ τοὺς μείρακας) and σκυρθάλια (μειράκια, ἔφηβοι), and Photius on σκυρθάνια (τοὺς ἔφηβους οἱ Λάκωνες). Chantraine 1999, s.v. *skurthalia*, identifies all these forms as hypcoristics with metathesis < σκύθραξ, but this does not affect the possibility of synchronic associations based on folk etymology.

<sup>36</sup> In a short paper on Call. fr. 567 Pf. (ἡδομένη νεκάδεσσιν ἔπισκυρῶν πολέμοιο), Barber (who reads ἐπὶ σκύρῳ) argues that Callimachus is here “employing a metaphor drawn from the ἐπίσκυρος game” in interpreting a Homeric phrase, the ἐπὶ πτολέμοιο γεφύρῃ of the vulgate at *Il.* 8.553 (Barber 1959, 101). Regardless of whether Callimachus is looking to this particular phrase, I suggest that, in responding thus to the Homeric text, he may have taken his cue from *Il.* 12.

<sup>37</sup> “[T]he farmers are quarrelling over a foot or two of ground, so the two sides are no more than the battlements’ breadth apart” (Hainsworth 1993, ad loc.). But such an interpretation leads to the implication that the armies are fighting over no more than possession of the wall, when in fact much more is at stake.

<sup>38</sup> Muellner 1990, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Vidal-Naquet 1986, 109-11.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 114.

<sup>41</sup> The transition is underscored by the repetition of *ipthimos*, predicated first of Sarpedon (12.410) and then of the Lycians as a group (12.417). In his contribution to a conference held at the Center for Hellenic Studies in June 2005, Muellner argues that the Homeric word *ipthimos*, usually thought to denote ‘strength,’ in fact indicates



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something more like ‘solidarity’ (Muellner 2005, who comments on this passage on p. 7; I take my translation ‘steadfast’ from a suggestion on p. 5 of the same essay). Sarpedon invokes his belonging to the social group as a way of prompting the group to action.

<sup>42</sup> Ellinger 1993, 208-11. Note that the Achaean wall is explicitly characterized as a *mêtis*: cf. *Il.* 7.324 and Nagy 1999, 48. This *mêtis* is necessitated by the absence of Achilles, who is precisely the embodiment of solidarity (cf. Sinos 1980, 34, 76).

<sup>43</sup> For the implication that the destruction of the Achaean ships means the annihilation of the Hellenes, see Nagy 1999, 317-45.

<sup>44</sup> I am especially grateful to Douglas Frame, John McClelland, and Leonard Muellner for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.